

ADDRESS TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEAKER JIMMY NAIFEH

JANUARY 9, 2001

I first want to begin by thanking the membership of this body for giving me the privilege of serving as your Speaker. My pledge to previous legislative bodies remains true today—I will always keep an open mind to your opinions and your beliefs and the door to my office will always be open to you. I also renew my commitment to treat each of you fairly and with the respect and dignity that each of you, as members of this House, deserve.

Even with the excitement of a new session in the air, today is in many ways bittersweet for me. Today marks the first time that I will have ever started a legislative session without my father or my brother being present. Also just last week Representative Rinks lost his father. We all learn lessons everyday; dealing with the death of loved ones brings a completely new set of lessons to learn. I learned a great many things last year during some very sad times; that life is too short to harbor bad feelings towards one another, that every day is a new challenge that must be faced head on, that, although difficult, we must always face up to our responsibilities.

I believe that many of us learned a great deal from the last legislative session, as well. It was difficult, it was trying, and it was, in many ways, not as productive as we would have like it to have been. We have a responsibility to learn from last year and to do better. We were sent here to make the State of Tennessee a better place; it is our responsibility to make sure that we don't fail the people that we represent.

If I had the answer to dealing with the budget concerns of this State—the foremost issue that we will be dealing with this year—I would have gladly told you that last year. I don't know what the answers are—but I do know what some of the questions are. How do we make our K-12 schools better for our children? How do we keep our college professors from accepting higher paying jobs in other States? How do we deal with the ever-increasing cost of TennCare while dealing with other major health care concerns like long term home health care? And how do we continue to make Tennessee a wonderful place to live, work, and raise our families?

We have to open our eyes to what is happening in this State and then we must be willing to open our minds in coming up with solutions to deal with those problems.

The Governor will propose his budget for the next fiscal year soon. In the past, it has always been the Legislature's responsibility to take that budget, examine it, and then work through it so that, in the end, it is balanced and fair to the citizens of this State. That same responsibility falls squarely on our shoulders again this year. And we must stand up and face it head on—we owe the citizens of this State no less than that.

We also have a responsibility to our citizens that depend on the State's TennCare program. Since its inception in 1994, the program has saved this state more than 2.5 billion dollars in health care spending while at the same time providing health care coverage to over 500,000 Tennesseans who would not have been eligible for Medicaid. Of that, over 150,000 of that are children. It is vital to the interest of this State and to the health and well being of our citizens that this program be strengthened, accountable and

properly stabilized. Most of us are probably guilty of paying too much attention to small, insignificant pieces of the TennCare program, while ignoring its overall condition. That's like missing the forest for the trees. We must never forget how important the entire TennCare program is—and we must all step up and make sure that it is cared for correctly. Every single member in this body has a number, a large number, of constituents who depend on TennCare—you owe them no less.

And while our budget concerns and TennCare continue to be the two largest issues that we must deal with, there are at least three other issues that I personally would like to see this body deal with in the next several months:

For the past thirty-two years, a desegregation lawsuit regarding higher education has hung over the heads of this State. We have the opportunity to bring this matter to closure. It's time to bring this matter to closure. Thirty-two years. A consent decree has been entered into and this decree will be effective only if this General Assembly finds the decree to be appropriate and provides the necessary funds to implement it. Education has always been the tool that our young people could use to reach their goals and to achieve their dreams. Now, I truly believe that if we give higher education the tools they need, they can resolve this dispute once and for all and we can—together—get on with the business of making higher education a realistic option for all young people. I am charging that our Education Committee to review the Higher Education program portion of this agreement. I am charging the Finance Committee to review the fiscal effects of this agreement. And I would welcome all members of this House as well as the comparable Senate Committees to attend those meetings. I also charge every person in the Higher Education community to implement both the letter and the spirit of this agreement so that all vestiges of segregation will be eliminated from Public Higher Education in Tennessee.

With the recent events of our national election and the questions that arose concerning the actual voting process, it is time to reevaluate and reexamine our own election processes to be sure that we have in place a fair and accurate system. A true democracy depends on the accuracy and fairness of its election. We should be sure that our current system assures a fair and just election every time so that no voice is left unheard—and that no vote is left uncounted. We should work to correct the complications that occurred with the State's motor voter registration process and we should work hand-in-hand with our local government officials to examine the adequacy of current voting equipment. I am charging the State and Local Government Committee to review our voting laws and voting equipment. Due process demands that each voter be treated fairly and that each vote count equally.

We must continue the trends initiated by this body last year in dealing with the day-to-day care of both our youngest and oldest citizens. Major childcare reform was accomplished last year in a bipartisan manner. [I] and the two leaders in this Well asked the membership to please pass some reform. We did so. Childcare is a vital issue for this State, in terms of helping get our children off on the right foot while providing peace of mind to working parents. We must continue to find ways to insure that our children are safe and secure in the child care facilities across this State. Our Speaker Pro Tem DeBerry and Chair-lady Chumney led us in our efforts last year. I am asking that they continue in these endeavors and I want to publicly applaud their efforts and this Body's accomplishments.

As for our older citizens, they have made their voices heard loud and clear. They want the choice of long term home health care. This body helped put initial funding into long term health care—but that should only be the start. We must continue to put an emphasis on improving the funding and the possibilities of this choice—and give our older citizens the dignity that they deserve in their senior years.

As I look out into the Chamber and up into the Gallery, it is literally amazing how much history has taken place inside these walls over the years. When this facility was built in the 1850's, no one then could have foreseen the growth in technology and the advancements in communication that we have today. Our space inside these walls is limited; we have had situations in the past where the galleries have been full and individuals have not been able to view the events on the floor of this body. The galleries are not accessible by disabled individuals. And, of course, we have individuals that want to know about the issues being debated on the House floor but simply cannot because of their inability to get to Nashville. Technology now gives us the ability to show what happens in this Chamber outside of this room. As some of you may remember, two years ago we broadcast our opening days of session to monitors set up outside in our foyers. Today, we are doing the same thing. We will continue to do so throughout this entire legislative session. Our staff is currently exploring the ways to provide live broadcasts of all of our sessions through a variety of means, including the possibility of television hookups or via the internet. By the year 2004, it is my goal that virtually every home and school and library in this State will have the ability to access and view the proceedings in this Chamber.

The next several months will not be easy—but then no one said that it would be. We asked for this job...if you didn't want to work, then you shouldn't have hired out. We have our work cut out for us.

For those of you who are new to this body, welcome. I encourage you to use the resources that are available to you. Ask questions and look for answers. The Legislative staff is available to assist you in every way possible. The more you understand, the easier you will find it to participate in the process.

For those of you who have served before, welcome back. It's good to see all of you again.

Some people last year compared the last session to a roller coaster ride. I am not sure whether that is totally accurate although it is probably fair to say that there were certainly a great many ups and downs last year. If the analogy to the roller coaster is true, I certainly hope that the ride this year will be smoother. And also that the end of the ride will get here sooner than it did last year.

Thank you for the confidence you have placed in me. It's time for us to go to work. Thank each and every one of you again.

Thank you very much.